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STRANGE TALES
FROM HUMBLE LIFE,
BY JOHN ASHWORTH.

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THE WIDOW.

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NOTE TO THE SECOND SERIES.

THE reader may rest assured these narratives are substantially true, as many persons now living in the neighborhood can testify. The names mentioned are real names, both of persons and places. Some of them, as in the former case, have arisen from my connection with the Chapel for the Destitute.

I am surprised and thankful for the reception given to the first eleven Tales, now constituting the First Volume—nearly half a million of which have been sold in a few months—and the urgent request of many friends that I would furnish them with more, induces me again to dip into my diary, where many more yet remain.

I am a tradesman, and make no pretensions to literary ability. If He whom I desire to serve condescends to use me as a medium of good to others, my earnest wish will be realized. To Him my prayer has been, "HOLD THOU MY RIGHT HAND."

J. ASHWORTH.

Rochdale, 1866.

The Widow.

THERE is no doubt but that many women would be a vast deal better without husbands, than to have such wicked, miserable creatures as they are plagued with; and there is no doubt that many children would be great gainers by becoming fatherless, for they have fathers who are more to them a curse than a blessing. When I have witnessed the misery of some homes, and knew that it was caused by the conduct of those who ought to make these homes happy, I have thought that the best use we could make of some of our old coal-pits, would be to fill them with these torments, providing they had no souls, for they do not deserve either a coffin or a respectable grave. But this would not be Christianity. In this world we shall all have something to exercise our charity and patience; and we are bound to do all we can to be a blessing to those who may be a curse to themselves. Instead of filling up old coal-pits with them, we must try to lead them to Him who died for the vilest of sinners.

But it is also true that many widows, like the widow mentioned in this narrative, are "widows indeed;" left like the sparrow on the house-top, alone; bereaved of their stay and staff, forced to struggle with bitter adversity, and often to weep alone over their hapless condition. And it is a

comfort to know that heaven has marked out the widow for its special care.

One of the noble replies given by Job to his "miserable comforters," when they charged him with having sent the widows empty away, was that he had not turned a deaf ear to their cry, but had caused their "hearts to sing for joy." And one of the most touching scenes in the life of Peter, is when he stands looking at the dead body of Dorcas, and the weeping widows gather round to show him the garments she had made for them. One of the imperative orders given by the Almighty to the ancient Jews was, "Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child. If thou afflict them in any wise, and they cry at all unto me, I will surely hear their cry." And one of the standing tests of true religion before God is, that we "visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction."

There is a pleasing sketch, from the German, of a boy who saw his mother weeping, and, affectionately putting his arms around her neck, said, "Why do you weep, mother?" His mother replied:

"I did not know you saw my tears, my child. I have often wept in secret, for I did not want to make you sad by letting you see my sorrow; but since your father was taken away, I have found it hard work to provide you bread and pay

your school fee. I intended to give you more learning before you began work, but I find I cannot; you will have to leave school, and help me get food for yourself and two little sisters. I have got you the situation of an errand-boy, and you will have three shillings per week."

"Well, don't weep, mother; I will be a good lad, and help you all I can," was the noble reply.

The first day the little fellow went to his work, he was sent with letters to the post-office. He put them in one by one. The postmaster stood at the door, and the lad very innocently said, "Where do all the letters that people put in your box go to?"

The postmaster kindly explained to him, that if he wrote a letter, folded it up, sealed it, and wrote on the back the name and residence of the person he wished to receive it, it would go to him, wherever he lived.

That night the fatherless boy wrote the following letter:

"To my Lord Jesus Christ in Heaven:

"My father is dead, and my mother weeps, and is sad because father is dead, and we are very poor. Mother wished to keep me to school a little longer, but she has no money; do help poor mother that she will not weep."

Having finished the letter, he folded it up, sealed it with some shoemaker's wax, wrote on the back: "To my Lord Jesus Christ in Heaven," and put it into the post-office.

When the postmaster saw the letter, he could

not tell what to do with it, and was holding it in his hand when a Moravian minister entered. He showed the minister the letter, observing:

"It is no use sending this to the dead-letter office; I will open it and return it to the simple person that has posted it, if I can find him out."

The letter was opened and read. The postmaster and minister were much affected. The minister begged permission to read the letter at a missionary meeting he was engaged to attend that evening. He read it to a large audience, and a lady rose, exclaiming:

"Oh! that I knew the little boy that wrote that letter; he should go to school, and his mother and sisters should have bread."

The mother and child were both present. The mother held down her head in amazement and fear, for it was all new to her; but the little fellow, all excitement, called out:

"Please, ma'am, I am here!"

The good lady fulfilled her promise. The boy was sent to school again, and the widow found a friend in need.

Now, I ask, did not the contents of that letter go to heaven before the little boy posted it? I believe they did; for God has given special promises to the orphan and widow. This little story is one illustration of the way in which He keeps

these promises, the following narrative is another:

In my seventh Report of the "Chapel for the Destitute," in the month of June, I mention having given relief to a widow. During the last winter I received a letter, asking if I should be at home the following evening, and stating that the writer was in trouble, and wished to see me on a very urgent matter. I replied that, having a published engagement in Stephenson Street Chapel, Manchester, I should not be at home, but might be seen on the day following.

I had forgot the stranger's letter until, arriving at Stephenson Street, the chapel-keeper informed me that a lady was in the vestry, anxious to have an interview with me. On entering the vestry she rose, but was so agitated that I requested her to be seated, and to inform me, in as few words as possible, the nature of her errand, as the audience would soon be waiting. She tried to tell me, but was so fluttered and nervous that she could not proceed, for she evidently feared to mention the real object of her errand. My time having expired, I asked for her address, and promised to call as soon as possible.

On calling, according to promise, I found that the timid young woman I had seen on the previous evening, was the only child of an aged,

respectable, and good-looking widow, keeping a small shop in Rochdale Road, Manchester. I was invited into the sitting-room. The daughter entered with me; but both were so greatly embarrassed, that it was several minutes before the mother could inform me of their real object in wishing to see me. At length she said:

"Well, sir, I think I ought to apologize for giving you this trouble; and though you have kindly fulfilled your promise in coming, I scarcely know how to begin. But if you will let me give you a little of my history, you will then better understand the request I have to make. Are you pressed for time? How long can you stay with us, sir?"

I looked at my watch, and replied, "About an hour and a half."

"Well, sir, I do not know what your first impressions about us are, but I have seen better days. I am of a good family, but my relations are all dead. I married a well educated, gentlemanly man, a commercial traveller, representing what was thought to be a wealthy house. But the house failed, and for several months my husband was out of a situation. This took away most of our savings. He, however, got another place, and, when setting out on his first journey for the new house, he came to my bedside—for I was then confined. Oh! how well I remember

that morning. He had his overcoat and travelling rug on his arm; he looked cheerful, and affectionately bid me good-morning. But in a few hours he was brought back—dead! He had just stepped on the steam packet, the boiler burst, and my dear Alfred was hurried into eternity!"

A fresh remembrance of the awfully sudden death of her husband brought a flood of tears to the eyes of the poor widow. She turned aside her head to hide them. For a moment we sat in silence. Thinking to direct the thoughts of the poor woman to what is of infinitely more importance than the death of the body, and having an impression that, in her case, joy would be mixed with grief, I observed:

"I do not think it is wrong to mourn over our departed loved ones. If we do not sorrow as those who have no hope, we have a bright spot in the cloud."

"Yes, sir, it is that which gives me the deepest pang, and makes my keenest sorrow. My Alfred was a scholar and a gentleman, but he was not a Christian. And, believing as I do, that as death leaves us, judgment will find us—for our Saviour plainly tells us we must be born again, or we cannot see the kingdom of God—believing this, and my dear husband being cut off as he was—almost killed me. For many, many days I refused

to be comforted, for I feared that to him it was a double death, I had no bright spot in the cloud.

"But, once or twice, a little hope hovered over my mind. I then began to pray that the Lord would let the soul of my Alfred come back, to tell me if he was happy. For this I prayed incessantly. I refused to let my room be lighted in the night, expecting and believing he would be allowed to come back, and tell me he was saved. Every evening I tried to prepare my mind for the meeting, for I truly believed he was coming. And, at last, come he did! perhaps not really and truly, but to me it was really and truly—call it a dream or what you will. He was dressed just as he was on the morning he came to my bedside to take leave of me, his overcoat and travelling rug on his arm. He looked me in the face, with a look of sorrow, and said, 'Sophia, you should not have done this. Why disturb me, why not submit to your fate! Your prayers and tears are of no avail for me now.'

"With a calmness which now appears to me amazing, I answered, 'Alfred, my own dear Alfred, do tell me. Are you happy? Do tell me this before you go back!'

"With the same look of sorrow, but in a lower and sadder voice, he replied, 'You know how I resisted the strivings of God's Spirit. I might

have been saved. I have had ten thousand offers of mercy, and rejected them all. Farewell!'"

Here the mother paused, and for several minutes we again sat in silence; then turning to me, she said:

"Mr. Ashworth, do you know of any book that has been written with the object of giving comfort to those who are convinced they have dear friends or relatives in perdition?"

"No, I don't think such a book could be written. The Judge of all the earth will do right, and to believe that He will, is the only ground on which a smitten soul can find any repose. To believe that God is infinitely holy, and true, and righteous in His dealings with us, is the only thing that can teach such mourners as you to say 'Amen' to His mysterious doings."

"Yes, sir, I think you are right. Nevertheless, it is very sad. I have often had a wish that I might be allowed to take my husband's place in hell, if he be there, providing his dear soul might go to heaven, for I could always better suffer myself, than see the sufferings of those I love."

"I don't think you are alone in that feeling," I replied; "but what did you do for bread after your husband's death?"

"Well, sir, a very infirm relative, who was both able and willing to pay for being carefully

nursed, hearing of my desolate condition, came to reside with me, and for several years I was able to keep on my house; but the relative dying, I, not being able to get another lodger, sold part of my furniture, and with the proceeds opened a small shop. For many years I worked hard, night and day, for a bare subsistence. Yet, careful as I was, I got a little in debt. To pay this off, I sold more furniture, and my husband's gold watch. About this time, the shop I occupied was sold, and my new landlord raised my rent so high that I could not possibly pay it. I removed to Rochdale Road, and again was nearly making bread, when the cotton famine almost destroyed my custom, and every month I found we were going down.

"Had my daughter's health been good, so that she could have learned some suitable business, perhaps we might have done better, but from a child she has been very delicate. A slight cold will confine her to bed for weeks; and the knowledge of her weak state, and our continual struggling to make ends meet, often makes her very dejected. We never have any of what we call luxuries. We live very cheaply and very bare, and perhaps this makes against the health of my child, but we must do so.

"And now, sir, I come to the part we wished

to see you about. During the last seven years, we have lost ground by little and little, until I now owe two tradesmen more than I can pay. To some, what I owe would seem a mere trifle, but to me it is a great sum. About six months since, I promised to pay them all on or before the 21st of June next, and have done all I can to fulfil my promise. The time is near at hand, and I shall not be able to keep my word. This greatly distresses me and my daughter. We have wept much and prayed much over the matter, for we believe in the goodness and providence of God, and trust we are both His spiritual children. If we are unable to keep on the shop, and our goods be taken, what shall we do? for, humanly speaking, we have not one relative or friend in this wide world to whom we could look for help.

"A few weeks since, I was reading your book, 'Strange Tales from Humble Life,' and especially that narrative called, 'Twenty Pounds; or, the Little Prayer.' While reading, I was astonished to find such a clear description of our own condition. After reading it, I said to my daughter, 'If there be help for us in this world, I have an impression it will come through the writer of this book.' We talked much about you, and earnestly sought for Divine guidance, and the result is the letter we sent you. I feel ashamed, and again make an apology for troubling you."

Having now become acquainted with the bereavements, trials, and struggles of the two truly respectable, and, I thought, pious creatures, that sat in silence waiting my answer, I found it was my turn to become thoughtful. Eighteen pounds would pay all, and establish their credit with their tradesmen. The cotton famine was nearly over, and this sum might save two deserving creatures from misery and ruin. What shall I do? Yes, what shall I do? I have no eighteen pounds to spare. I have, every year, hundreds of cases of distress, but I relieve them with very small sums, and this sum would relieve many such cases. These were my thoughts, and, not knowing what to do, and fearing to crush all their hopes, I at last said:

"Well, you must excuse me giving you no answer at present. I have a few wealthy friends, who might, if they knew of your case, give me something to help you. One of them has a long knitted purse, one end of which, he says, specially belongs to the Lord, for He gives by rule, and gives much. Sometimes he tells me the Lord's end is getting rather full, and asks me if I have any real cases of need. I will see this good man, and ask him how his purse is and let you know early."

With this promise they both seemed very well satisfied, saying, that whoever might find

the money, they would gladly return it when able.

I saw my friend with the two-ended purse, but was sorry to find both ends just then were empty; but I was sure he had his own good reason for having given his all, for he gave much, and much comes to him to give.

I wrote to say that the purse was empty, but lest they should despair, promised to call and see them again.

On Sunday, the 18th of June, I had an engagement at York Street Chapel, Heywood. The day was very hot. Passing the house of one of my friends, residing betwixt Rochdale and Heywood, I called, requesting they would allow me to bathe my hands and face in cold water. I was shown up-stairs into the bath-room. When I came down, the lady of the house said:

"Mr. Ashworth, I have just been reading to my husband your narrative of 'Twenty Pounds; or, the Little Prayer,' and he thinks it was a very timely deliverance for old Mr. Gadsby, and so think I."

That moment a very strange sensation came over me, for I felt God was at work for the fatherless and widow.

"Indeed," I replied, "I have a little tale to tell you about another person that has been reading that narrative;" and at once I told them

all about the poor suffering creatures in Rochdale Road. They both heard me with the greatest interest, and one of them said:

"But surely you are not going to find them the money, are you?"

"I don't know that," I replied. "My Bible says, 'Blessed is he that considereth the poor, for the Lord will remember him in the time of trouble.' If I live, I, no doubt, shall have trouble. Yet it will be a great consolation to feel and know that the Lord will not forget me then."

For a moment both of them looked very thoughtful, and, my time having expired, I shook hands and left them.

On the morning of the 20th of June, I awoke much earlier than usual, for I had been much troubled in my sleep by, as distinctly as a dream can be distinct, seeing mother and daughter in greater trouble than ever. I at once saw I must immediately decide what to do, and I did determine to advance the eight pounds for one of the creditors, and see the other, and request him to wait another six months, and I would see that he did not lose his money. This I determined to do that day.

On opening my letters, on the morning I was going to see the distressed widow, one of them was from the house I had called at on the Sunday, and read as follows:

"DEAR SIR: After you left on Sunday, we could not help thinking of the two poor creatures you mentioned. It would be a very sad thing for them to be turned out of their living, and I write to say we will furnish you with ten pounds. Will you be so kind as to convey it to them? The Lord bless you."

"Yours truly, —— ——"

On reading this letter, I thought, Yes, God lives! He lives! He lives, and is a Father to the fatherless. A Judge to the widow is God in His holy habitation. Leave thy fatherless children and I will preserve them alive, and let thy widows trust in me. Yes, He lives, and blessed is the man that maketh the Lord his trust.

Some say this was a singular chance or accident; a case of remarkable good luck. [Indeed, people that believe in luck, chance, and accident, are very inconsistent, if they pray.] Such persons heed not, or believe not, in an all-seeing, wise, and superintending Providence. A sparrow falls not to the ground without God's notice, and He tells His children, that the very hairs of their head are numbered; and urges them to call on Him in the day of trouble, and He will deliver them. The doctrine of luck is the doctrine of the fatalist.

That day, on entering the little shop in Rochdale Road, the daughter was standing behind the counter, and seemed unusually calm; and I had an impression some one had been with help before me.

"You seem more cheerful to-day; have you got out of your difficulty?" I asked.

"No, sir," was her reply. "I always feel

happy when I see mother so. She is very much lifted-up with more than a conviction that we are to have help to-day." Then, with tears in her eyes, she said:

"I never saw my mother so earnest in prayer, and so long on her knees as she was last night. On rising she smiled at me, as I lay in bed, saying, 'Oh! how happy I feel! the Lord has really heard my prayer, and we shall see it very soon.'"

When the mother came into the shop, I laid the money down. She looked first at the money, then at her daughter, then at me; then folding her hands, she calmly said, "The Lord did not turn a deaf ear to the cry of the widow."

I left the little shop of the poor but now exceedingly happy mother and daughter, thankful that my Lord had honored me by making me the medium through which He had sent help to His needy children, and wishing that the rich in this world's goods did but know how much real pleasure they forego by not honoring the Lord with their substance. Many of them, I know, often feel the joys of doing good; and to do good is a real joy. These have the blessing of Him who has said, "Inasmuch as ye have done it to one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." And they will also have the blessing and the prayer of many a suffering one, many an orphan, and many a Widow.

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